NEWS ANALYSIS 1-0765 MAY 12, 1976
CHARLES MEDD

ASSESSING THE PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES

ANNCR: THE LONG LIST OF PRESIDENTIAL PRIMARIES IS NOW DOWN TO ITS FINAL MONTH, AND CHARLES MEDD LOOKS AT HOW THE SYSTEM IS WORKING AND ITS IMPACT ON 1976 POLITICS.

VOICE: MUCH IS SAID ABOUT THE WAY AMERICANS GO ABOUT CHOOSING PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, AND NOT EVERYTHING IS FLATTERING. THIS YEAR THE VOTERS WILL ELECT ABOUT THREE-FOURTHS OF THE DELEGATES TO THE REPUBLICAN AND DEMOCRATIC PARTY NOMINATING CONVENTIONS IN A RECORD NUMBER OF THIRTY STATE PRIMARY ELECTIONS. CHIEF AMONG THE CRITICISMS IS THAT THE PROCESS, THAT BEGAN IN FEBRUARY AND EXTENDS UNTIL JUNE, TAKES TOO MUCH TIME, COSTS TOO MUCH MONEY AND IS OFTEN TOO CONFUSING FOR EVEN RATIONAL PEOPLE TO UNDERSTAND. MOREOVER, THE CRITICS SAY, THE MASS MEDIA HAS MORE INFLUENCE OVER THE FINAL RESULTS THAN EITHER THE CANDIDATES OR THE VOTERS.

THOSE WHO DEFEND THE PRIMARY SYSTEM SAY IT'S THE BEST WAY TO EXPOSE THOSE WHO WANT TO GOVERN THIS COUNTRY TO THE GOVERNED. THEY ADMIT THAT IT'S EXPENSIVE, TIME-CONSUMING AND OFTEN DISORDERLY BUT IN THE END A GREAT DEAL BETTER THAN ENTRUSTING SUCH IMPORTANT DECISIONS TO A HANDFUL OF MEN OPERATING IN SECRECY BEHIND CLOSED DOORS.

LOOKING AT THE 1976 CAMPAIGN, THOSE WHO SUPPORT PRIMARIES SAY THE SYSTEM IS WORKING FINE. THE DEMOCRATS BEGAN THEIR RACE WITH ABOUT ONE DOZEN CONTENDERS, MOST OF THEM WELL-KNOWN NATIONAL FIGURES. UNDER THE SEVERE TEST OF VOTER SCRUTINY, THAT CROWDED FIELD HAS BEEN NARROWED DOWN TO A SMALL HANDFUL OF SURVIVORS LED BY AN OUTSIDER FROM GEORGIA, JIMMY CARTER. UNTIL A FEW DAYS AGO, MUCH OF THE MEDIA WAS PREPARED TO HAND THE NOMINATION TO MISTER CARTER, BUT APPARENTLY THE

VOTERS WEREN'T LISTENING-- AT LEAST NOT IN NEBRASKA WHERE SENATOR FRANK CHURCH, A LATE-COMER TO THE CONTEST, WON A SURPRISING VICTORY. AND NEXT WEEK, STILL ANOTHER LATE-COMER, CALIFORNIA'S POPULAR YOUNG GOVERNOR JERRY BROWN, IS EXPECTED TO AGAIN SLOW THE CARTER BANDWAGON IN THE MARYLAND PRIMARY WHERE BROWN IS NOW THE FAVORITE.

AS FOR THE REPUBLICANS, PRESIDENT FORD WAS AT THE START EXPECTED TO PUT DOWN THE CHALLANGE FROM RONALD REAGAN, AND IN THE EARLY PRIMARIES HE DID JUST THAT. BUT AGAIN THE VOTERS DIDN'T PAY MUCH ATTENTION TO WHAT THEY READ IN THE NEWSPAPERS, AND BY WINNING FIVE OF THE LAST SIX PRIMARIES MISTER REAGAN HAS TURNED THE REPUBLICAN RACE INTO A VIRTUAL STANDOFF.

WITH LESS THAN ONE MONTH TO GO, IT NOW APPEARS LIKELY THAT NO CANDIDATE WILL EMERGE FROM THE PRIMARIES WITH A CLEAR VICTORY, THAT THE NOMINATION WILL NOT BE DECIDED UNTIL THE TWO PARTIES HOLD THEIR MID-SUMMER NOMINATING CONVENTIONS. THERE THE DELEGATES, MOST OF THEM CHOSEN IN THESE STATE-BY-STATE ELECTIONS, WILL MAKE THE FINAL DECISIONS UNDER THE FULL GLARE OF TELEVISION. AND WHILE SOME WILL STILL CLAIM THERE MUST BE A MORE EFFICIENT, MORE ORGANIZED WAY TO PICK CANDIDATES, NO ONE WILL SAY THE SYSTEM LACKED EITHER OPEN COMPETITION OR EXCITEMENT.

-0-